

Happy Birthday and All That

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BLOOMSBURY

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HERE WAS FRANK WITH a trolley that was empty but for Tom and the flowers that James had said he wanted to buy for Mummy, and there was Melody, standing on a podium next to the Take-Away-Style Curry counter. She was looking pretty cute in her green uniform and some inappropriate shoes. Every so often she interrupted the music to tell people about special offers. Frank hadn't realised that it was a Superstore Party Nite.

'There'll be 30 per cent off for the next twenty customers at the pizza counter . . . and 20 per cent off all purchases of savoury bakery items tonight . . . And now a spot prize for safe trolley steering. My manager, Mike, is touring the store right now with a big box of Celebrations for someone with a wheely fantastic way with their trolley!' Melody told the chilled air.

'Go away Frank,' she hissed away from the microphone. He took the bunch of flowers and poked her leg. James and Tom laughed.

'Piss off, Frank!' she said, perilously close to the microphone. 'And now a prize,' (she kicked at him with her spiky toes) 'for our oldest and youngest customers. If you think that might be you then come on up to the stage by the curries. We're looking for our oldest and youngest in store right now . . . piss off, Frank.'

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He was standing in front of her in mock-adoration, now strewing the stage with chrysanthemums. They'd been on special offer. The music started again.

'Look. I'm going to the toilet until you're gone. Now piss off or the manager's going to be on to me.' She jumped neatly off the stage and disappeared through a 'Staff Only' door.

Those who fancied themselves the oldest customers were making their slow way towards the empty stand. People with babies just days old were starting to queue. Free nappies might be on offer. Frank picked up the microphone just as Melody reappeared.

'Get down! I'll lose my job!' she laughed.

'And our next prize,' Frank said, 'is for the couple who most resemble each other. Matching trainers? Similar girths? Same tattoos and haircuts? Get up here. We've a year's free shopping to give away!'

'Frank!'

'Get down, Dad!'

'What else are we looking for?' he continued. 'We've got prizes in these categories: most obnoxious toddler, heaviest and lightest pensioner, most ridiculous hairstyle – but our star prize of a lifetime's supply of frozen food will go to the person who, in the judge's opinion, least needs the contents of their trolley! So get yourselves up here.'

Melody's manager was back. He seized the mike and two security guards got Frank in an armlock and marched him out of the store. James, close to tears, pushed Tom in the empty trolley behind them.

'Looks like we're going to Tesco's, kids,' Frank said. 'We can get Mum some nicer flowers and have chips in the café. What do you think?'

'I saw Mrs Fleance in there, and another teacher watching you,' said James.

'It was just a joke,' said Frank. 'Mum will never know.'

* * *

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Mum was at home, sorting out the washing.

Her name was Posy, unfortunate but true. She had spent her life failing to live up to her namesake, Posy Fossil in *Ballet Shoes*. She tried her best, and wore scoop-necked T-shirts that were described as ‘ballerina-style’ in catalogues, swirly skirts, flat shoes, and now there was even a fashion for wrap-around tops, just like the pink ones her aunts had knitted for her. She’d given up ballet at twelve, concentrated on jazz dance and then nothing. Not dancing anyway.

Posy had tried to give her own children (at least the boys) more sensible names. She had James, Poppy, Tom and Isobel, but then their surname was Parouselli.

Parouselli. The name had seemed like a present. She heard carousel music, and saw candy canes and pink and yellow parasols. The merry-go-round ponies whinnied for joy at it; they pawed the ground and leapt up and down their poles. Dick van Dyke did a little dance. She had tried it out – Posy Parouselli – before she’d even met its owner. She’d been like her thirteen-year-old self, trying out her name with that of whichever boy she currently liked. Perhaps it was the name she’d fallen for. She saw it on lists for lectures and tutorials. Frank Parouselli. She was smitten.

What a disappointment it would have been if Frank hadn’t been like himself: tall and dark with eyes the colour of a Cornish summer sky, the blue you see in August when you are swimming far out from the shore, and look back to where the sky meets the gorse-covered, pineapple-scented cliffs. Frank Parouselli. It was lounging in a stripy deckchair, licking an ice cream, reading something funny. Ah, first impressions.

Frank played stand-up bass. His band ‘The Wild Years’ were slowly greying and balding. The New Year’s Eve gig seemed to come round more and more often. The twice-weekly practice sessions had become a weekly night down the pub with Melody, the pretty twenty-two-year-old who

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sometimes sang with them. They still had their spot at The Oak Tree and a number of other regular gigs too.

Frank had sold his motorbike. The Parousellis had a green Volvo estate.

‘It’s a prep school car,’ the man at Ringwood Motors had told Posy, and she’d smiled; as if they’d ever be able to afford prep school. She entertained vague and silent hopes that the children might win scholarships, perhaps the boys might even go to Winchester College where their grandfather had been, but only as day boys of course.

‘Better drowned than duffers. If not duffers, won’t drown,’ Frank said, quoting the absent father in *Swallows and Amazons*, which James was ploughing through. Frank didn’t believe in private education, and nor did Posy, apart from for her own children.

Frank knew that he was more or less the man in that Talking Heads song ‘Once in A Lifetime’. He and Posy had loved it when they were students, but now here he was waking up every day thinking ‘Well, how did I get here?’

He was almost that man, but not quite. He loved Posy, he loved the children. It was all the trappings he could do without; the Jolly Good School, the importance of Start-rite shoes at thirty-seven quid a go (and he was going round in holey old deck-shoes, not that he cared, or damp beige desert boots, £12.99 from Portswood Shoefayre). He hated the chit-chat in the playground that was oxygen to Posy, all the committees that she was on.

‘I don’t know why you bother. Why don’t you all just decree that every family has to give fifty quid a year instead of all this endless fundraising? Think of the time and effort you’d all save! Or just let somebody else do it.’

‘But what if everyone thought that? There’d be no pre-schools if nobody volunteered. I feel compelled . . .’

So she spent long evenings at the Chair’s house making things out of saltdough, and stuffing felt Teletubbies and

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Tweenies for the St Peter's Pre-School Autumn Fayre.

The only time Frank felt like himself now was when he was playing; but even with The Wild Years he sometimes felt out of it. He was the only one who was married. Al was divorced, with one child, Finn, whom he didn't see often enough; Rich and Ron were still single. They drove from pub to pub in Rich's van, which was really the band's as they'd all put £300 in for it. They hung out in student pubs and looked at girls. When Frank went out with them he felt about eighty years old.

Posy folded the clean towels and jammed them into the airing cupboard. The slumbering volcano of quilts and blankets and swimming towels looked so inviting that she was tempted to throw herself in, to find oblivion in James's leaping dolphins duvet cover. She must pull herself together, wake herself up, hit the Diet Coke. She didn't have long before they'd be back from the supermarket, and Isobel might wake up at any moment.

There were many things that Posy wasn't allowed to do. These included being depressed. If ever Frank noticed her being sad or melancholy or miserable (it had to be quite extreme for him to notice, and involve audible sobbing) he would say things like:

'Everyone feels like that Pose, you've just got to carry on,'
or,

'But don't you think that depression is the ultimate self-indulgence?'

It was a different matter if Frank was depressed. His depressions were existential crises, intellectual matters. They'd last for weeks, usually around Christmas and New Year, or family holidays, the arrival of their babies, or other people's birthdays. They involved him getting very drunk each night and watching action thrillers, aeroplane hostage movies, and made-for-TV dramas on Channel 5. The next day his breath

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was such that Posy declined any offers he made to do the morning school run. He would usually not be up in time anyway, having fallen asleep on the sofa, then woken up to find something else unmissable: 'The Properties of Rope' on the BBC Learning Zone, something like that. He would tell Posy all about it. It was lucky his work never involved early starts.

That was the clean stuff put away. Now for the hip-high heaps of the dirty. She knelt on the landing and started to sort it into colours.

Those whom the gods wish to damn they first call promising. Frank Parouselli, BA Hons (First Class) English Literature, was a BettaKleen distributor. This was one of the day jobs that he couldn't give up. Posy kept her eyes down as she worked so as not to see into the spare room with its stacks of the BettaKleen catalogues (most of the customers and the other distributors called them 'books') and the array of products awaiting delivery. Frank had to make up the orders, sorting the microwave cooksets, the sink tidies, the plate stackers, the ceramic teddy scouring-pad holders, the swing-bin fresheners, into the mean little bags that the company supplied. Frank was amazed that anyone could want any of it.

'Hey!' he nearly told his customers. 'Don't buy it. Won't it just highlight the emptiness of your life, the futility of your existence? A viscose carrier-bag dispenser with cheeky chick motif won't bring you happiness. Whatever need it is you are trying to meet, whatever void in your life you are trying to fill, the tartan trollymate isn't the answer.'

'I am a Pedlar of Pointlessness,' he would tell people at dinner parties who asked what he did.

'He's really a musician,' Posy would quickly add. They found that they were rarely invited back. Frank so often seemed to do something that Posy thought was inappropriate. There had been the time when he had eaten a huge platter of

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cherries that Posy said had been clearly for decorative purposes only. Not only had he wolfed down handfuls of them, implying that the huge five-course dinner he'd just eaten wasn't enough, he'd put the stones back in the bowl.

'You must have realised that they weren't intended for consumption. There would have been a small empty bowl for the stones if anyone was meant to eat them,' Posy told him later. She was also mortified because she thought that he had been much drunker than everyone else, sitting there like a grinning gnome, laughing when nobody else did.

'Cherries for display purposes. So they live in a department store window. That's obscene,' Frank replied, and left for his shed at the bottom of their garden where he went to smoke and practise.

Posy didn't allow smoking in the house, so Frank was always walking out on the family, leaving for his shed. Posy insisted on it, but it made her feel as though he always had somewhere better to go, and that she was being dumped in the kitchen like someone boring at a party.

Posy's kitchen was sunny and yellow with a long farmhouse table where the children did painting. It was the kitchen she'd always wanted. She found herself smiling as she wiped crumbs and jam from the oilcloth.

She and Frank had been together for years now. They'd first shared the upstairs of a Victorian house with a turret and slates and a pointy roof that made Frank think of the Dragonmobile in Wacky Races. The weekend that Posy found out that she was pregnant was the weekend after her father had died of liver failure. Her mother had died two years earlier of cancer, caused, Posy and her sister Flora were certain, by years of walking around with internally clenched fists, years of biting her lip and swallowing her feelings and anger in case she invoked the wrath of their father. Posy and Flora were left the Surrey Tudorbethan house they so hated. They sold it, and at twenty-five Posy had tens of thousands of pounds. She was

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glad that her father hadn't known about her baby. She was planning to break the cycle, to be with someone not like Daddy. She married Frank.

Frank advocated throwing Posy's inheritance in the river, or giving it anonymously to a centre for alcoholics or the homeless or battered women. Posy thought he was probably right. She had hated that house. Every room had held some horrible tableau. The dining room was probably the worst, all the farcical family dinners, and the time he'd smashed their Easter eggs. Biff, biff, biff, his slow hand like a cartoon fist. He'd been jealous of the pretty eggs, even though he'd said he didn't want one, that he hated chocolate.

'Bloody great idea for a religion,' he'd growled. 'Glorification of a Roman torture method!'

The real reason was that he felt excluded from something the 'girls' had. They'd watched open-mouthed, three empty eggshapes, and then Flora and Posy had fled to their friends round the corner, leaving their mother to face the music, again. The friends had been out, on the sort of Easter Sunday walk on Tadworth Common that other people's families went on. They'd walked down to the garage and bought each other and their mother the only eggs left. Caramac.

Posy decided to buy the biggest, most beautiful house she could afford. It was Edwardian with five bedrooms, sash windows, fireplaces and stained glass, and overlooked Southampton Common. She had fallen in love before she'd even crossed the doormat. The hall had black and white tiles. There were so many rooms that she and Frank joked that they could spend the whole day there and never meet. They could sleep in different postcodes. There was a lot to be done, but she thought that they would slowly do it all.

When Posy chose her house she had no idea about the wildlife that would come with it. There were foxes and badgers and squirrels on the Common across the road from them, a hedgehog in their garden. A grey squirrel liked to sit

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on their fence and eat from Plested Pie bags and Ginsters pasty wrappers. Their garden was visited by woodpeckers and wood pigeons, chaffinches, treecreepers, wagtails, goldfinches and bullfinches. She wondered if it was the proximity to the Common that gave them such huge spiders, spiders whose steps across the ceiling at night were audible, spiders that terrified Poppy.

Until she had her house Posy hadn't known that slugs came so big, or in such an array of colours: horrible oranges, deathly greys and colourless ones like creatures from the deepest, coldest oceans. Perhaps that came from living under the Parousellis' bath and in the cupboard under their sink. She never knew when she was going to come across some fresh horror. And having children made it much worse. Today there had been a curled-up, dessicated caterpillar in James's pocket. Trousers fluff had clogged its little boots. She had taken it into the garden and tried to revive it in a puddle. She left it beside some tasty-looking leaves. When she checked later it had disappeared, but she feared the worst. She decided that she would have to talk to James about it, explain that caterpillars had a right to freedom. He would probably cry, even though she'd tell him that it had probably survived and crawled away. Oh remorse, remorse.

There was ivy growing on the front of the house. Posy chopped it back and tried to drag it down when it managed to penetrate the windows. It forced its way in overnight, coming through the gaps between the upper and lower casements. If ever they went away, Posy imagined that it would have taken over the house by the time they came back. They'd return to find it sleeping in their bed; it would finish the jam and let dirty mugs pile up in the sink.

The house had leaks and missing tiles, and rattling, rotting windows. The outlines of the floorboards were visible through some of the carpets.

'Don't pay someone to do it. I'll fix it,' Frank said for the

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first few years, but he never did. Eventually all the money was gone, and paying someone was no longer a possibility. Posy looked longingly at the ads for builders and roofers and handymen in the back of the *Advertiser*. She knew that there was an underground stream nearby. She thought that it was flowing away with her chi, as well as causing the damp stripes along the walls. Frank had no time for any of it.

‘Hey! I thought I married a Bohemian, someone with values, so why are you always spluttering about guttering? Did you ever see a house fall down? Well, did you?’ he asked.

‘Re-pointing is necessary!’ Posy said. ‘I keep having bad dreams about falling through rotten floorboards. Other people’s windows aren’t like this.’

‘Oh Pose, you don’t want to fall for any of that replacement windows crap. It’s all a scam. A capitalist plot.’

‘I didn’t say *replacement* windows. Perhaps when Isobel’s a bit older I could do some of them myself.’ Perhaps she would sit happily in her pram whilst Posy rubbed down, filled and re-painted some of the windows.

‘Why don’t you get Flora to sort the windows out for you?’

‘Because we haven’t got any money.’

Flora was the ideal person to solve the Parousellis’ damp and window problems, to re-point everything. She was the proprietor of ‘Perfect Solutions’, a company dedicated to sorting things out. ‘If it’s legal we’ll do it!’ the leaflet boasted. Flora organised parties, anniversary celebrations, sometimes whole weddings. She cleared out cupboards, streamlined houses (feng shui an optional extra), imposed filing systems, hired and fired cleaners and gardeners, obtained quotes and engaged plumbers, builders, roofers and handypeople of all descriptions. She easily tackled the simpler repairs herself. She did other people’s Christmas shopping. The floor plan of John Lewis was behind her eyes like a circuit board. Her clients received complimentary Christmas presents from Perfect Solutions: L’Occitane

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lavender bath milk for the women, a delicious-smelling, soothing shaving gel for the men. Perfect Solutions knew how busy and stressed they were, that they needed a treat. Flora had even written people's thank-you letters for them. She assembled self-assembly furniture. The coming of Ikea to Southampton would see her profits soar.

Flora managed all of this without ever getting her cuffs dirty. She always wore very clean, very crisp, linen shirts, often with matching trousers that gave her a stern Maoist look and impressed her clients.

Even as a child Flora had been unnaturally neat. As an eight-year-old she had chided Posy for not closing cupboards or shutting her drawers properly. On the last day of each term she'd look as neat and shiny as on the first. Her possessions endured for ever. At thirty-six she still had a mauve-plastic folding brush and comb set that she'd bought at Superdrug when she was fourteen. She had the world's tidiest make-up bag (no clogged mascara, or stubby lipsticks, or damp, cracked compact). Her bars of soap stayed immaculate even to the last sliver. The only thing that threatened to slip out of her control was her bright yellow hair, which was curly and tended towards the frizzy. It had to be restrained in a very tight plait. Posy's hair was similar, but she let it do what it wanted, and it made a wild brown halo around her face.

It had been seeing Posy struggle at Christmas when James and Poppy were small that gave Flora the idea for Perfect Solutions.

'I hate Christmas. It's a route-march of consumerism with slave labour by women!' Posy had raged just out of earshot of her children. 'I was up till midnight making a sheep's outfit, and tonight I've got to make a page's outfit. And tomorrow night I'll have to do all the cards. I have to home-make everything because you can't buy any Christmas food that won't possibly contain traces of nuts. And then James will

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probably reject it all anyway, and just want soft-scoop raspberry-ripple ice cream instead.'

'Make Frank do more then,' Flora said.

'Oh he's hopeless. He acts as though all the present-buying and wrapping, and cards and shopping and decorations were some folly of mine, some private hobby that he shouldn't interfere with. And nobody except you will get me any good presents, even though I'll have spent hundreds of hours on everybody else. What I really need is a wife.'

Posy wanted someone kind and unflappable, a sort of human Renault Espace. Someone who would remember to buy kitchen roll, who would empty the bin without being asked, who would always have plasters and antiseptic wipes in her bag. Someone with a smooth, gentle face, and soft, strong arms.

'I need someone like you full-time,' she told Flora. She wasn't really thinking of Flora. She was thinking of her friend Kate. She had once dreamt that she'd been browsing the stalls at the Pre-School Christmas Fayre hand-in-hand with Kate. They knew how many jelly beans there were in the jar, and had correctly guessed the weight of the cake. They had watched the clown show together. The children were off, safely engaged elsewhere.

The reality was that Kate would be running the raffle and Posy would be doing one of the less popular stalls; shelling out endless 20ps, whilst trying to restrain (at least a little bit) James and Poppy's acquisitiveness and passion for gambling on the Beany Baby tombola. Her youngest would be thrashing in her arms, desperate to be crawling around on the hall's dirty floor, to get under the stalls and to be scalded by cups of tea.

The grass on the Common was studded with cigarette butts and turning to yellow dust, but the Parousellis still went there nearly every day. They hadn't been away this year. (Izzie was too young for a holiday to be a holiday.)

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Oh August, low season for fêtes, bazaars and jumbles. Posy was getting withdrawal symptoms. Her love of them was genetic. Her mother had always been on their school's PTA, and would do the book stall or the white elephant – something that didn't require her to make anything. Aunt Is was a queen of fêtes. Every weekend there seemed to be one. Her friend Beatrice (known to the girls as Aunt Bea) made felt animals, and they donated honey for sale. If they weren't manning a stall, then they would take their young visitors to somebody else's Open Garden or at the very least to the WI market for a haul of jam and cakes.

'Tuck in! Tuck in, girls!' they'd say; words to gladden any heart.

The girls often stayed with Aunt Is in the holidays. The time dragged. Aunt Is lived in St Cross, in a house overlooking the Watermeadows. Sometimes the girls would walk along Kingsgate Road and into Winchester. If they were by themselves they could go into Bluebells, their favourite shop, and buy the sort of things that their aunt thought utterly pointless – smelly rubbers, magnetic cats, mini dried-flower paperweights, Flower Fairy notebooks and pens – and they thought necessary to their happiness.

'Utter junk,' Aunt Is said. 'Lot of nonsense, no use to anyone.' These opinions didn't stop her from decamping to Cornwall to help Aunt Bea run the North Cornwall Bee Centre with its own gift shop and café, some years later.

Posy and Flora tried to make the walks as long as they could, visiting any museum that was free, looking in the charity shops, stopping to listen to any busker or street entertainer who didn't look liable to involve them or embarrass them. They patted the bronze boar near the Courts, they browsed (pointless! pointless!) the Tourist Information Bureau. They would even look at whatever exhibition the Guildhall was sporting: The Guild of Embroiderers, Rotary

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Regalia . . . The citizens of Winchester seemed oblivious to the prison on the hill, and went about their Hunter-booted business as though it wasn't there, about to slide down on a lava flow and engulf them all. Flora and Posy sat on the steps of the Buttercross and drank Coke. They sat on benches in the Cathedral Close and read and read. Sometimes there was a film crew working on an adaptation. They hoped that they might be spotted.

'We'd be great as Elizabeth and Jane Bennet,' Flora said, even though Posy hadn't done *Pride and Prejudice* yet, and was doomed to get *Mansfield Park* for O level. 'But I bet we'd end up as Mary and Kitty.'

Aunt Is always took them on a tour of the Cathedral. She was an official guide and on duty at least twice a month. The highpoint of their visit would be a trip to the Theatre Royal where they would eat ice cream in the interval and never, ever, go to the bar.

Much of the time was spent taking the dogs to the Water-meadows. They liked to walk past a house where a parrot called Persephone lived. The girls stopped and peered. Persephone's owner waved, but never invited them in.

Aunt Is knew every dog that they met. Flora and Posy were introduced. There were long conversations about swans. If they went by themselves one of the dogs always ran away, meaning the girls yelled and searched and worried, and finally trailed the useless lead home to find that the dog had beaten them there, and was tucking in to a dinner of biscuits mixed with raw cabbage and carrot and pilchards.

'Demon Hound!' Aunt Is barked, handing round pieces of crumbly fudge, that might have been toffee, or perhaps Kendal Mint Cake. Often Posy and Flora couldn't imagine how the time until the next meal could possibly be filled. Fortunately there were many meals each day, most of them involving jam. There was a whole cupboard devoted to it.

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Every summer Flora rearranged the jars, putting the newest at the back, and explained the system to Aunt Is who laughed and said, 'Thank you, Flora.' But still five-year-old jars rubbed shoulders on the table with the only just bought. The Aunts spooned the green layers off the top ('Penicillin. Can only do you good'). Posy chose honey, mostly because she had a crush on Rupert Brooke. Aunt Is had a 1915 edition of '1914'. Posy propped it up on the bedside table so that she could look at it as she fell asleep.

Aunt Is reserved some special recipes for her vegetarian nieces. The things the girls most dreaded were Cheesy Rice (a blackened pyrex dish of rice poached in milk with strings of melted cheese and chunks of boiled celery, cut to resemble caterpillars), and on their last day, High Tea. Posy, of course, always pictured them sitting on wooden thrones, a version of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. The reality was cold discs of very soft carrot, and hardly cooked shop-bought quiche. Aunt Is considered a whole one each appropriate.

'Mushroom for you, Flora? Posy? Leek and broccoli? I remembered that those were your favourites last time.'

'Mmm. Yes please,' they would say politely. She heaped cauliflower onto their plates.

'Tuck in! You've a long journey.' And then there would be delicious cakes and meringues from the WI and strawberries and plums or gooseberry fool. Mummy collected them (Aunt Is was her aunt really) and drove them home over the Hog's Back.

Fifteen years later when Aunt Is moved to Cornwall, Flora decided to buy her house. Flora's inheritance had been prudently invested, and was sitting there, a big fatty lump, forced corn. She had the house valued and paid her Aunt the asking price.

'It will all come back to the two of you eventually,' Aunt Is said.

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It was lucky that Aunt Is took almost everything with her: nothing could have survived Flora's plans for the perfectly streamlined, beautiful home. The old mangle and some enamel basins planted with Californian poppies that were left sitting by the back door were sent to live at Posy's.

SEPTEMBER

WHEN JAMES PAROUSELLI gave his teacher the note, she expected it to be about 'The Asda Incident' as she'd come to think of it. But it wasn't. Mrs Parouselli seemed unaware that her husband was deranged. 'Dear Mrs Fleance' (Posy had written in her neatest writing),

'You might think that I am this flaky kind of person, but I am not. You have the wrong idea of me. I am very organised really. Very together.

James's lack of plimsolls is really a sign of how organised I am. His feet, as you probably have noticed, are so narrow and so flat that I have to get special Start-rite plimsolls with velcro flaps, not just elastic, and even then he requires special insoles or they would still fall off. These have had to be ordered by Frenches and take two weeks to come. I did order them well in advance of the new term, only to find that his feet had grown one and a half sizes in a fortnight. He's gone from 11½ to 1. And they were professionally measured beforehand. Incidentally these plimsolls cost £12.40 with the insoles as extra, not £2.50 as the Ladybird ones do, and we have tried Clarks ones too. They never fit.

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Anyway, what I wanted to say is please excuse James's lack of plimsolls. It isn't his fault, and it isn't really mine. I am a standard solid Mum, even though my children's feet are not of standard width. Not flaky or unreliable.

Yours sincerely,
Posy Parouselli.'

'Flaky? Flaky?' Mrs Fleance thought of the cream crackers, and the cheese straws and the Cornish wafers that James Parouselli brought in for snack time. He did always seem to be the child with the most crumbs down his front, to come in after lunch with the biggest blobs of yoghurt on his sweatshirt.

Flaky. Was Mrs Parouselli flaky? She remembered the home-school visit she'd made to them just before James had started in Reception. She *had* noticed that the windows were in need of attention, the paint peeling, dry and damp wood exposed. Or perhaps she meant chocolate flakey. Mrs Parouselli could certainly once have looked like a Flake advert girl, that poppy field one, but not any more. She imagined all the Parousellis on the Common opposite their house, eating double 99s.

How should she respond?

'There's a lot worse than being flaky,' she felt like saying. At least Mrs Parouselli wasn't one of those pushy critical parents, always on about the reading scheme, and trying to prise other people's children's baseline assessment scores out of her. She marked the letter to go in James's file, and gave Mrs Parouselli a special smile at hometime.

When Posy opened the door a dinosaur fell on her head, then a tunnel, and then a bucket of Popoids.

'This cupboard!' said Posy, trying to sound jolly, not tearful, annoyed, murderous or despairing, even though there was nobody there to hear her scream.